

Notes on Plotinus - Ennead One, Sixth Tractate - Of Beauty

1. Beauty Is Not Merely Proportion and Symmetry

How is it that we first come to experience Beauty? Perhaps first it is through our sense of sight. We see Beautiful things as soon as our eyes are open. We also experience Beauty via the sense of hearing very early. First through people who speak Beautifully, but also through Beautiful songs. We are seemingly able to abstract from these early sensory experiences a concept of Beauty as a whole, and eventually can recognize it in other places. We can eventually see the Beauty in someone skillful, in Intellectual pursuit, actions taken, and ultimately the Virtues themselves.

What causes us to perceive these various things as Beautiful? How are we able to recognize things as Beautiful? There are a multitude of Beautiful objects, sights, sounds, and ideas. Is there a single standard of Beauty which encompasses them all, or does each individual thing have its own standard of Beauty? Ultimately, we must ask, what is the Principle of Beauty itself? If there are multiple, what are the various Principles of Beauty for different circumstances?

There are some things which are inherently Beautiful, such as Virtue. Surely there is no Virtue which is not Beautiful. Then there are some things, such as material objects, which are not universally Beautiful. Some material objects are Beautiful, and some are not. Given that this is the case, the bodies which are Beautiful must be as such because they participate in a principle above them (i.e. an Ideal Form). Let us first examine the principle of Beauty which Beautiful objects participate in. From there, we can extrapolate and answer additional questions.

The Stoic take on this question is that visual Beauty is a consequence of the proportions and symmetry of the parts of something. On this view, the proportion of these parts to each other, as well as their proportion to the entirety of the visual object itself make it Beautiful. Especially if the parts are colored in a complimentary way. If a sort of proportionality and symmetry are necessary for an object to be Beautiful, then Beauty must be something compound. If Beauty is proportion and symmetry among constituent parts, and if something has no constituent parts, then it follows that such a simple thing could not be Beautiful. The same can be said for the constituent parts of something Beautiful. The parts themselves being simple and having no further constituent parts would have no means by which to engage in proportion or symmetry.

This is an odd conclusion. After all, we should only be able to create something Beautiful by combining things which are themselves Beautiful. To suggest otherwise implies that someone could create something Beautiful by combining a variety of hideous parts together. Even worse, all manner of simple things would be excluded from Beauty if symmetry and proportion are prerequisites. A single ray of sunlight, a single piece of gold, and a single shining star would all have Beauty denied to them on this view. This is also true for music. While a harmony of notes could be Beautiful, no single note could ever be called Beautiful. For music, we similarly end up with the problem in that several Ugly notes can be added together to create a Beautiful melody.

To further illustrate that proportion and symmetry themselves do not constitute Beauty, let us examine other, more complicated Beautiful things. Occupations, laws, and sciences can all possess Beauty. Yet what does proportion have to do with any of them? Further, things can be proportional and possess symmetry while not being Beautiful for it. Consider the following absurd

propositions: Wisdom is the weakening of the mind. Justice is the manifestation of foolishness. Such statements are mutually agreeable. They imply that someone who is Wise is also likely to be Just. Yet their mutual proportion and symmetry do not make them Beautiful, and certainly do not make them true. What makes Justice and Wisdom Beautiful is their Divine truth. Yet they are themselves complete and total. They possess no constituent parts for symmetry or proportion. We have previously discussed the components of the Human Soul (See notes on Ennead One, First Tractate, Section 1). Who could describe what proportions of them will result in Beauty? If beauty is proportion and symmetry, what could make pure Intelligence Beautiful?

For these reasons, we must conclude that proportion and symmetry by themselves do not constitute Beauty. Beauty then must be a higher order principle which both simple and compound things can participate in. We consequently must account for this principle.

2. **To Be Beautiful Is to Participate in an Ideal Form**

Let us return our attention to the experience of visually Beautiful objects. The experience of a Beautiful object is nearly immediate and intuitive. The same can be said for Ugly objects. Such a direct and immediate perception of Beauty (or Ugliness) can only be explained if it is perceived directly by the Soul intuitively. If this were not the case, it would take time (i.e. multiple steps) to experience the object and deduce its Beauty rationally. Given that the Soul can directly recognize Beauty without any intermediaries, it must be concluded that Soul and Beauty are of the same quality. If they were not, there would need to be an intermediary medium for the Soul to perceive Beauty through. This is further proof the Beauty resides in the higher order realm of the Intellectual (i.e. Divine Principles or Ideal Forms).

If Beauty is Intellectual, how can material objects be Beautiful? We have previously discussed how, given the fact that not all physical objects are Beautiful, it must be the case then that the Beautiful ones participate in a higher order quality which is not essential to all physical objects. It then stands to reason that Ugly objects fail to participate in such a higher order quality. Such higher order qualities which things may participate in are none other than the Ideal Forms themselves. From this, we can conclude that what makes something Beautiful is its participation in an Ideal Form. Conversely, we can then define something as Ugly which does not totally participate in an Ideal Form. The Ugliest of things then would be completely formless, not participating in any Ideal Forms, even by a small degree.

The most Beautiful things participate in an Ideal Form maximally, and in doing so their constituent parts (if there are any) harmonize and become one complete thing. For example, a Beautiful house is a building whose constituent parts unify to perfectly harmonize with the Ideal Form of Houses. Each individual part must also be harmonized with its respective Ideal Form for each individual part to be Beautiful. For example, a Beautiful board must be maximally harmonized with the Ideal Form of Boards. From here, the overall Beauty of each individual piece lends itself to the overall harmony and Beauty of the completed house itself. Thus, the simple and compound both are Beautiful by the same criteria.

3. **How an Incorporeal Soul May Experience Beauty in Material Things**

If it is the Soul itself which perceives Beauty, then the Soul consequently must have a faculty for such appreciations. This faculty must be separate from other faculties, as Beauty is its own distinction which may incorporate or be separate from other judgments which can be made about something. If the Soul appreciates Beauty in something that is also of a metaphysical nature (i.e.

something of a similar kind to the Soul itself), it may do so directly. But how can a Soul perceive Beauty in something which is not of the same kind as itself, such as a material object? In these cases, what can bridge the gap between the metaphysical and the physical?

Let us consider an example to illuminate this question. How can an architect use their Intellectual idea of a building to then judge that a particular physical building is Beautiful? The only possible explanation is that the material building bears the physical form of the metaphysical Ideal Form of Buildings. By abstracting the forms of the physical building and the components which make up the building, the architect realizes that material becomes unified into one thing under the umbrella of the Ideal Form of Buildings. The matter of the building as arranged then participates as a variant manifestation of the Ideal Form of Buildings.

From this, we can deduce the nature of the faculty of the soul which identifies Beauty in material objects. This faculty works by appreciating the Ideal Form which something participates in. For something material, the recognition of the Ideal Form it participates in occurs via recognition of the shapes, sizes, relative positions, and interactions of its component parts. Once the Soul has perceived the overarching form of a material object which encompasses all of its component parts, it may then relate this single unified Intellectual thing to the Soul itself. The process is similar to the way a Virtuous old person might recognize the early signs of Virtue in someone young. They appreciate this young person via their shared experience of being Virtuous. The shared similarity then acts as a medium by which two similar things may grasp each other.

The appreciation of color is similar. In abstracting the color of a material object which has been illuminated, a person can recognize the color that it is. From there, it can be related to other objects which are the same color. Ultimately, it is via the recognition of a material object's participation in a higher order Ideal Form. For example, someone might see a red apple, recognize it as red in color, and realize that this Redness is the same as the Redness which a red rose participates in.

It is for this reason that fire is the most Beautiful of all material objects. Being as close to immaterial as possible while still ultimately remaining material, it illuminates the nature of the Incorporeal Ideal Forms. Like Fire, physical objects receive the image of the Ideal Forms, however the Ideal Forms and Fire remain impassible to the material objects themselves. Fire heats a material object without itself being cooled down, and Fire itself illuminates by reflecting the color of other objects. Material objects cannot cool down or illuminate Fire. These relationships are one way. An object which cannot properly reflect the Fire's light is discolored and appears ugly. Similarly, a material body which cannot completely reflect an Ideal Form is never fully Beautiful.

The same can be said for Music as well. Although a melody cannot be heard from a signal note, in hearing all of the notes in a melody, we may abstract from their pitch, duration, and relative position to other notes that they combine to form something larger than themselves. Melodies are imperceivably directly from the individual notes, but the faculty of the Soul can recognize that the individual notes become unified to form a single melody which is Beautiful. We can recognize the same melody played on different instruments, and see that they are different variant manifestations of the same song.

Now we have adequately described how our sense perceptions of material objects and music can be unified into a single Intellectual object which the soul can grasp as Beautiful. Such sensed

Beauty is the result of the object or sound's unification into an image of an Ideal Form (e.g. the Ideal Form of a building or melody).

4. The Superior Beauty Perceptible to the Soul Alone

Let us examine in more detail the types of Beauty which are only reachable via our higher order Intellectual faculties (i.e. the Intellectual Soul).

With regards to Beautiful things of the material world, we are only able to grasp them via our physical senses. For example, a blind person has no way of coming to know visual Beauty, and a deaf person has no way of coming to know auditory Beauty. From this, it follows that higher order Intellectual Beauties may only be grasped by those who are versed in the ways of Intellectual reasoning. How could someone with no knowledge of the Sciences recognize the Beauty in Scientific endeavors? How could someone with no knowledge of a skillset, occupation, or trade recognize any Beauty within said skillset, occupation, or trade? This is also true with regards to the Virtues. How could someone appreciate doing the right thing with no knowledge of Justice? How could someone appreciate self-control with no knowledge of Temperance?

It is said that the morning and evening stars themselves cannot compare to the Beauty of the Virtues. Such Beauty may only be enjoyed via the use of the Intellectual faculties. Only by Intellectual contemplation and abstraction can someone discover the true completeness of the higher order Essences, Ideal Forms, and ultimately the Divine itself. Such visions are reserved for the Soul's higher order faculty for the identification of Beauty alone. Those who can appreciate such Beauties will experience pleasure far greater than anything material sensation could ever provide, as they may directly experience true Beauty itself. All Souls experience pleasure, joy, wonder, and delight at both the sensed and contemplative Beauties. Those who are especially moved by Beauty are what we call Lovers (See Notes on Ennead One, Third Tractate, Section 2).

5. Beauty of the Soul and Ugliness of the Soul

Let us examine more closely the Lover of the incorporeal Beauties. What is it that they experience when they witness a skillful practitioner, Moral Virtue, and other manners of Beauty perceptible only to the Soul itself? What is it that they experience when they witness such Beauty inside of themselves? What is the nature of the euphoric and excited state they experience? Why do they yearn to transcend their physical bodies and unite with this higher order realm of the Beautiful?

Such experiences can only be of the Soul which experiences genuine love. After all, no shape, color, size, proportion or other visual queue can incite such feelings. Being metaphysical and incorporeal, the causes of these feelings are necessarily colorless, shapeless, and sizeless. They are, in a word, invisible. These experiences can be the direct experience of Wisdom and Virtue by the Soul itself, purely within the realm of the Intellectual. It is the Intellectual recognition of Wisdom and Virtue in oneself, and in other people that evokes such feelings. Whether it is Justice, Temperance, or Courage, we all experience and recognize the Virtues. Anyone who experiences the Virtues directly must concede that they are Beautiful. Such Virtues of the Soul are complete and encapsulate their own Essence. Since they do not require a material medium or matter to present themselves, we can say that they have Real Being (i.e. their Being is not dependent on some other thing. They have Being in of themselves.). As we have previously discussed, sensed objects are only Beautiful via their participation in the Ideal Forms (i.e. the Real Beings themselves). The Essences, the Ideal Forms, the Real Beings are Beautiful in of themselves.

It remains to be explained rationally why the experience of such Real Beings evokes the sensations of excitement and delight within us. To investigate this relationship, let us explore the things contrary to the Beautiful (i.e. Ugly things). If we can discern that which makes something Ugly, we can use this to retroactively deduce some things about Beauty.

Let us imagine an Ugly soul. They are Unjust and do not think before they act. They have no Prudence or Temperance. They are ruled by their bodily whims and passions. They have no Courage, and cowardly avoid bodily harm at any cost. Lacking Wisdom, they seek only temporary and material things. Physical pleasure and bodily satisfaction dominate their desires. They selfishly think of only themselves. They are endlessly Envious of every good fortune experienced by anyone else. Worst of all, they are completely satisfied by and even proud of their vile impurity.

The cause of such Ugliness can only be impurity of the Soul. Corrupted by a taste for the material and physical, they are distracted from the things which naturally exist within the realm of the Soul by things which are foreign to the realm of the Soul. The Soul becomes weighed down by these material and physical desires, and the Soul ultimately loses sight of the metaphysical all together. The most impure of Souls ironically only focus on the temporal and physical Matter. The cause of this distraction can only be the result of the coupling of the Soul and the Body. It is by this connection that the Soul can develop a distracting taste for the material. Consequently, the Soul corrupted can only redeem itself by a process of purification. By purifying itself of the material and physical, the Soul can return to its primitive, pure, and default state of metaphysical, Intellectual contemplation.

The Soul becomes Ugly via its mingling with the Body. In this interaction, the Soul becomes distracted. Eventually, the Soul become so confused that it mistakes the Body for itself. Ugliness of the Soul is a result of impurity, just like the Ugliness of a piece of Gold can stem from the specs of impure elements within it. Just as Ugly Gold may be restored to its proper, Beautiful state by the removal of such impurities, the Ugly Soul may be restored to its proper, Beautiful state by the removal of its Bodily-focused impurities. The Soul regains its Beauty by removing from itself the things which have a nature foreign to it.

6. **Beauty as Purity, Ugliness as Impurity**

It is for these reasons that Empedocles and Plato both said that that Courage, Temperance, Prudence, and indeed all of the Virtues are purifications. It is for these reasons that the Eleusinian Mysteries teach that those who have not been purified before their death will sink to the swampy bottom of Hades' underworld. The impure enjoy impurity itself. The filthy find their joy in foulness, like dirty pigs delighted as they bathe in mud. If Temperance involves divorcing oneself from the passions of the body, does this not imply that to be ruled by the body is impure? If Courage is to overcome the fear of death (i.e. separation from the body), does it not imply that to covet the safety of the body is impure? If we are to value Magnanimity, does this not imply that ultimately the petty dealings of the material world are not worth our attention? In Prudence, we find great Wisdom in thinking before we act, and in general holding the Intellectual as superior to the whims of our emotions and bodily desires. In detaching oneself from the impurities of the material, the purified Soul becomes harmonized with the things which share its fundamental nature. In detaching itself from the material, the Soul can return to its primordial nature as an incorporeal Essence, an immaterial Ideal Form which resides in the realm of the Divine. The purified Soul resides within the realm of the sources of Beauty itself.

The Purified Soul then necessarily becomes supremely Beautiful. After all, the Intellectual Essences and Ideal Forms are the Beauty of the Soul. They share the same nature. Thus, as the Soul becomes harmonized with Beauty itself, the Soul ascends to Divinity itself. This is because all Beauty comes from the Divine. The higher the Soul ascends, the more Good it becomes.

From this we can see that the Real Beings are Beautiful, and the non-Beings are Ugly. For Goodness, Fulness, and Beauty are the same. Matter, only ever encompassing a small portion of an Ideal Form, and always dependent on something else for its own existence, is thus Ugly and Evil. Goodness and Beauty, as well as Ugliness and Evil exist along the same continuum. They may be judged using the same methods.

And so we can define Beauty and Ugliness as follows. On this continuum, we necessarily begin with The One, which is completely Full, completely Good, and Completely Beautiful. From The One, once distinctions start being made, we end up in Nous, the realm of all things Intellectual. These Intellectual Beings then birth Soul, and make the Soul Beautiful. It is then the Soul which brings Beauty to all things beneath it. The Soul brings Beauty into the material realm by shaping things as much as is possible to resemble the higher order Ideal Forms and Essences. As things descend further from The One, they become less Beautiful and more Evil. Only by ascending back to the One can lower order things become Beautiful and Good again. The Material finds Beauty in Soul, the Soul finds Beauty in Intellect, and Intellect finds Beauty in The One.

7. Ascension to The One Is The Supreme Goal of All

We must then discuss The One, The Good which every Soul desires. This Good is unmistakably Beautiful to any and all who have experienced it. Unlike material desires, to desire The Good is Good itself. Such Good is only attainable to those who ascend upwards towards it. To do so, we seek our primordial nature by discarding the things foreign to us. The things which we have become encumbered with on our decent to the material. This is reflected in the Eleusinian Mysteries, where the appointed purify themselves by removing their clothing. They ultimately pass by all that is foreign to them until they reach The Oneness and simplicity of The Good itself. This pure Oneness is the unification of all things by the revocation of all concepts of otherness and distinction. This Good, this Oneness is the most primordial principle of Being which all things participate in, and without which noting could be thought about or spoken of. Everything which Exists participates in Being (see Parmenides poem). Within the context of Being itself, everything exists. Intellect Exists, Soul Exists, and (as a consequence) Life exists as well. How could the realization that everything Physical and Metaphysical is unified into this One not evoke a desire for harmony? How could such a harmonization not evoke the highest pleasure?

It is even possible for those who have not grasped The One to desire it as Good. For those who have grasped it, they are transformed and filled with feelings of love and delight. Such a transformed person understands that lesser loves cannot compare, and has no desire for the things foreign to them which they previously held as Beautiful. Those who have grasped The One are like those who have directly experienced the Gods. They are forever transformed, and unable to view the world and cosmos the same again.

Such an experience of completely pure Beauty reveals the inferiority of everything else. The One is the most singular and primordial. It is the only thing which is not contingent upon anything else. For even the Divine and the Gods are contingent on The One.

The One is thus the unmoved mover. It remains impassible while providing everything for all things which come after it. Yet in spite of all it provides, it is never reduced or diminished. The One, as the primary Beauty, grants Beauty to everything else. Yet nothing can increase its Beauty. In doing so, The One allows everything else to love and be lovable.

Thus, the pursuit of The Good, The One must be the ultimate goal of all Souls. It is the goal which is deserving of our entire effort. Those who can grasp it are truly blessed, and those who cannot are ultimately denied of Beauty and pleasure. An experience of The One is so valuable, it renders everything else worthless. There is no misfortune in anything except to fail in grasping The One. To possess an entire kingdom, the entire Earth, or even the heavens themselves cannot compare to a direct experience of Beauty itself.

8. **Souls Must Flee the Material To Experience Beauty**

How can we go about experiencing this Divine Beauty which is foreign to our sensory perceptions? In the Mysteries, Divinity is out of sight in the recess of a sanctuary, reflecting how our senses are insufficient to perceive true Beauty. In light of this problem, is there a technique or skill we can leverage to gain an experience of Beauty?

Since our sense perceptions are insufficient as a means to perceive Beauty, they are of no use in such a pursuit. In fact, they may only be of hindrance. Since anything which can be perceived by the senses is not true Beauty, the things we perceive with our mere senses can only serve as distractions. Even the perception of Beautiful material bodies is a distraction. A body can only ever possess a small portion of the Beauty which it is a variant manifestation of (i.e. which it is an image of). To seek Beauty in an object is like trying to grasp at something reflected in a pool of water. The source of the image reflected in the water is not itself in the water. We are reminded of the fate of Narcissus, who famously fell into the water and was swept away while attempting to grasp at a reflection of Beauty. Such is the fate of the Soul which holds onto material beauty. Such a Soul is dragged downwards by the material objects they hold onto.

Given this, we must do the opposite. We must flee from the realm of the material if we ever wish to see anything truly Beautiful. Just as Odysseus fled from the appetizing feast offered by Circe and fled also from the enchanting song and dance of Calypso. Odysseus was Wise, and ultimately realized that such sensual pleasures could not truly satisfy him. Such is the case for all Human Beings. True Happiness lies in the Intellectual realm of Nous (and above), not in the material world.

How then do we flee from this material world full of traps for our sensory faculties? We cannot flee by foot or any other form of physical movement. After all, we are not fleeing to anywhere on Earth. To flee, we must close our eyes, and engage a way of experiencing things which everyone possesses, but few attempts.

9. **How to Experience Beauty Directly**

What is the nature of this way of experiencing things which does not rely on our physical senses? How can we train ourselves to use it? How can we ultimately experience Beauty directly?

At first, pure Beauty is impossible to see, as though it were too dazzling for the untrained eye to bare. To train themselves initially, one must first properly experience the Beauty of the lower

realms. First one must train to appreciate the noblest occupations and pursuits taken up by Human Beings. From there, one must train to appreciate Beauty in the various Good deeds and accomplishments of the noble and Virtuous. After this, one may at last learn to appreciate the Beauty in the essence (e.g. Soul) of these Virtuous people themselves. Each step in this process serves as the foundation for the next. Understanding noble occupations and pursuits allows you to appreciate the resulting consequences of these occupations and pursuits. Understanding the Good consequences which result from Virtuous actions allows someone to distill the Good nature within Virtuous people itself.

How can we experience the Beauty inherent within a Virtuous Soul?

To do so, we must look internally and learn to identify the Beauty in Virtuous people with whatever Beauty exists within ourselves. If someone does not find Beauty within themselves, they must refine themselves to bring it out. To refine the Beauty in oneself, one must mimic the methods of a sculptor. Sculptors reveal the Beauty in a statue by slowly chipping away at the material that they sculpt. By removing material in the right places, polishing rough edges, and smoothing out course patches, the sculptor slowly reveals the Beautiful statue within the material. Such is the path for refinement of the Soul. By removing the parts of ourselves which are superfluous, casting out the darkness within us, and straightening out the parts of ourselves which are crooked, we can refine the Beauty that is naturally ours to begin with. With ceaseless perseverance, we may improve ourselves slowly. The purifying pursuit of Virtue within ourselves will lead us to reflect Divine Temperance, Courage, and Prudence through ourselves.

When we have at last achieved a Virtuous life, we have succeeded in casting out that which is foreign to our true selves. No longer bound by the limitations of the physical, the Virtuous will know what it means to say that true light and Goodness transcends that which can be measured. Incommensurable with all physical limitations, the purified Soul reaches out to infinitely. Dwelling entirely within its own nature, the purified Soul becomes the very thing which it has been striving to see. If someone has achieved this state, it is impossible for them to doubt it. No guide may assist them any further. All that is left is to strain and experience oneself. When the purified Soul can experience itself directly, it has consequently experienced true Beauty.

This is the only way a Soul may Experience Beauty directly. A Soul blighted by impurity, weakness, and vice can never experience such Beauty, even if it is pointed out to them directly. To experience something, the faculty for perceiving it must be commensurable with it. An eye must possess a nature similar to light for the light to have a means to interact with it (i.e. light must be able to bounce off our retina for us to perceive it). Thus, Plato teaches that the eye is the most similar of the sense instruments to the Sun. Such is the case for Beauty and the Soul. A Soul must become Beautiful in order to share a nature with Beauty and perceive it directly.

To do so, first a Soul must engage in Intellectual reasoning and determine the Beauty of the Ideal Forms and Essences. In doing so, a Soul will understand that all Beauty lies in the Intellectual. This is because all things are Beautiful via their participation in the Intellectual Ideal Forms and Essences. Above the Intellectual is The Good or The One itself. All of the Beauty in the Intellectual is in turn derived from The Good itself. Being the most full and complete, The Good is the primary Beauty. The Ideal Forms and Nous represent the sphere of Intellectual Beauty. The Good itself transcends the Intellectual (as there are no distinctions to be made at the level of The Good or The One). As a result, all Intellectual Beauty is then Beautiful via its reflection of the ultimate fulness of

The Good itself. Thus, all Beauty ultimately is derived from The Good, The One itself. To seek such Beauty is the ultimate goal of all Souls.